Facilitated dialogues

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Key methods discussed in this chapter

Appreciative enquiry, change labs, social innovation labs, the circle, Theory U, T-Labs, scenarios, world café, learning journeys, listening projects, dialogue interviewing

Connections to other chapters

Facilitated dialogues often draw on action research to enable deeper learning while also providing opportunity for action research to interrogate dialogue-into-action (Chapter 15). They also often make use of visioning or imagining the future to liberate participants to transcend the constraints of the present and so explore potential pathways to a better outcome. There is a strong link to the discussions on futures analysis in Chapter 10 and scenario development in Chapter 11.

Introduction

There is a growing body of experience surrounding the design of social dialogue to create spaces that can be used to enable transformation (Pohl et al. 2010; Fazey et al. 2018; Naumann et al. 2018; Pereira et al. 2018b; Schöpke et al. 2018; Pereira et al. 2019, 2020). As one key intention, they ‘seek to generate social-ecological innovations aimed at challenging and changing existing roles and routines, power dynamics, relations among groups and networks, resource flows, as well as meaning and values (and culture) across different contexts and scales’ (Schöpke et al. 2018, 91).

SUMMARY TABLE: FACILITATED DIALOGUES	
DISCIPLINARY BACKGROUND	KNOWLEDGE TYPE
<p><i>The methods in this chapter are derived from or have most commonly been used in:</i></p> <p>Sustainability Science, Public Leadership, Sociology, Geography</p>	<p><i>The methods in this chapter are primarily used to generate the following types of knowledge:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploratory • Explanatory
RESEARCH APPROACH	PURPOSE OF METHOD
<p><i>The methods in this chapter originate from or most commonly adopt the following research approaches:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretive/subjective • Collaborative/process 	<p><i>The most common purposes of using the methods in this chapter are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder engagement and co-production • Policy/decision support
TEMPORAL DIMENSION	SYSTEMIC FEATURES AND PROCESSES
<p><i>The methods in this chapter are most commonly applied to the following temporal dimensions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present (typically within the last 5–10 years) • Recent past (post-1700s) • Future 	<p><i>While most methods can do many things, the methods in this chapter are particularly good (i.e. go-to methods) for addressing the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SES components and linkages • Diversity • Power relations • Multiple scales and levels or cross-level interactions • Social-ecological interactions over time • Transformation • Social learning • Collective action and collaborative governance • Exploring uncertainty
SPATIAL DIMENSION	
<p><i>The methods in this chapter are primarily either or both:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-spatial <p><i>The methods in this chapter are most commonly applied at the following spatial scales:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local • Regional (provincial/state to continental) • Multiple places/sites around the world 	

In response to the growing number of complex social-ecological challenges today – those shining a spotlight on unsustainable trends and the realities of inequality and injustice – many are calling for transformation (Feola 2015; Blythe et al. 2018). For scholars, engaging in or supporting attempts to deliberately push for or navigate transformation necessitates moving into a new kind of transdisciplinarity; that is, action-oriented knowledge generation that is co-produced and interwoven with multiple knowledge(s) (Tengö et al. 2014; Pereira et al. 2019). The complexity of global challenges and their increasing interdependence demand solutions that transcend individual actors, specialists, sectors or disciplines and draw on a wide range of perspectives. Dialogue between actors in a complex social-ecological systems (SES) can contribute to the institutional change required for deep social innovation and transformation of that system (Mair and Hehenberger 2014). However, this demands a specific type of facilitation, one that enables dialogue, sense-making, reflection and reflexive learning, while supporting the reframing of issues in ways that allow solutions – or at the very least, attempt to experiment and transform – to be co-created and co-realised (Sharpe et al. 2016). In this way, we use ‘dialogue’ as an umbrella term to include a suite of facilitated processes that might also be used during processes for knowledge co-production, participatory action research, lab processes, future search processes and more.

Interventions that are driven by ‘top-down’ directives are widely recognised as problematic since they often leave stakeholders feeling that the project outcomes are imposed from the outside. Strategies like these are often met with resistance and fail because they are inappropriate in addressing contextual sensibilities and do not convey a sense of ownership from stakeholders during the decision-making process (Freeth and Drimie 2016). In contrast, facilitated dialogues are carefully designed processes. They aim to support multi-stakeholder groups in addressing complex SES problems through the creation of ‘safe’ or ‘safe enough’ spaces where SES innovations can be fostered and developed (Pereira et al. 2019, 2020).

The most common dictionary definition of a dialogue is simply a conversation between two or more people. A much deeper and more distinct meaning is provided by David Bohm (Bohm 1996), who interrogated the source of the word: it is derived from the Greek root *dia*, which means ‘through’, and *logos*, which means ‘the word’ or ‘meaning’. By drawing on this deeper interpretation of the etymological origins of the word, we see that the definition can be expanded to include an emphasis on questions, inquiry, co-creation and listening to uncover one’s own assumptions and those of others while suspending judgement and pursuing a collective search for truth. These qualities shape and frame the conditions for dialogue to take place in a more reflective and dynamic manner. Greater inquiry into the viewpoints of others helps to develop greater understanding of those others and creates an opportunity to adopt new ways of thinking. When assumptions are explored, participants can challenge their own ideas and recognise bias and thought patterns that influence – and possibly inhibit – lively engagement. Successful dialogue often requires a skilled facilitator who is capable of navigating the tensions between different viewpoints carried by the participants in the dialogue (Drimie et al. 2018).

Dialogue is an emergent and generative communicative interaction between actors, moving well beyond an exchange of information to include the building of relationships. These relationships are both a means to address a challenge and an end in themselves. In other words, dialogue is inherently relational and as such requires a critical mass of different actors who need to relate to one another, sometimes under tense circumstances. A diversity of perspectives in dialogue processes potentially allows for the emergence of innovation when different people from different backgrounds, with their own ideas and creativity, interact to address challenges (Drimie et al. 2018; Pereira et al. 2020). This needs to be thoughtfully constructed in order to reach some kind of coherent outcome (Pereira et al. 2020).

Deciding on what a successful outcome might be is a critical first step before a dialogue is convened. The specific details are not important. What is important is being clear about the intentions of the dialogue before bringing people together and deciding which tools to use. The following questions are important. Why are we bringing this group of people together? What purpose lies behind this specific process of change? What is this whole thing about?

Most, if not all, the tools presented in Table 9.1 are underpinned by the essential principle of clarity of purpose. Building on this, the tools focus on enabling open communication, honest speaking and genuine listening. They allow people to take responsibility for their own learning and ideas. They create a safe space or ‘container’ for people to voice their assumptions, question their previous perceptions, judgements and worldviews, and change the way they think. The tools can generate new ideas or solutions that go beyond what anyone had thought of before, and create a different level of understanding of people and problems. They allow for more contextual and holistic ways of seeing.

SES problems and questions

To give an example of where facilitated dialogue has been used to address challenges in SES, a recent paper on social-ecological transformations analysed nine projects ranging from the Xochimilco Wetland in Mexico and Mopani farmers in South Africa, to Argentinian seeds and agro-ecology in Soweto, South Africa, to peri-urban South Asia, Mombasa in Kenya and Cabo Delgado in Mozambique (Pereira et al. 2019). Facilitated dialogue involves a range of methods since these dialogues for transformation are intervention processes that require thorough planning but are still flexible enough to allow ‘emergence and the unexpected to occur’ (Pereira et al. 2018b). Ideally, the form a facilitated dialogue will take depends on the local context and the people involved (Feola and Butt 2017). The following are some of the conditions under which a facilitated dialogue may be deemed a useful method for generating new solutions and experiments that aim to have a transformative impact (Westley et al. 2013; Westley et al. 2015; Ely and Marin 2016):

- There is a complex SES challenge to address, in which impact is difficult to achieve, sense-making is needed, but agreement has emerged that ‘business as usual’ is no longer an option (Moore et al. 2014; Westley et al. 2015; Olsson et al. 2017).
- A diverse group of participants with the potential for transformative agency exists and can move any new idea or process forward and source the necessary resources (Moore and Westley 2011; Westley et al. 2013).
- There is an identifiable action-oriented outcome as the end goal of the process, as opposed to just a product or ‘thing’ (Pereira et al. 2019).
- There is a motivated convenor who is willing to invest the resources needed for the process (Westley et al. 2015; Drimie et al. 2018).
- There has been no successful implementation of alternative innovations that counter the dominant way of doing things (Westley, McGowan, and Tjörnbo 2017).
- There exist noticeable shifts in the culture or economic or political context that can serve as potential windows of opportunity for facilitated dialogue to take place and be effective (Olsson, Folke, and Hahn 2004; Gelcich et al. 2010; Westley et al. 2013).

Facilitated dialogue presents opportunities for researchers to explore the intersection of action and analysis, where they navigate the fine line between actively intervening in processes to enable change and also being able to provide a critical analysis of the types of changes that are occurring. Some researchers are finding themselves to be ‘transformative space-makers’

(Marshall, Dolley, and Priya 2018). By facilitating dialogues, researchers have been able to open up a space for productive collaboration and interaction between diverse stakeholders with the intention that there may be actionable outcomes with which policy and other decision-making actors can engage (Tengö et al. 2017; Marshall, Dolley, and Priya 2018).

Brief description of key methods

As facilitated processes, dialogues typically combine a number of different participatory methods over several workshops and experiments, based on the requirements of the group and the complex question being examined. The tools that are presented in Table 9.1 draw largely from an important book reflecting on dialogue entitled *Mapping Dialogue: Essential Tools for Social Change* (Bojer et al. 2008). This is a key resource for more detailed descriptions of each tool.

A key skill in facilitating dialogue lies in the ability to combine different methods to achieve the desired space that is most conducive to realising the intended objectives of the interaction. A skilled facilitator needs to be able to take the group on a journey, reaching specific landmarks along the way. The choice of method and the order in which it is undertaken lie at the core of this and are largely intuitive.

Table 9.1 Summary of key methods used in facilitated dialogues

<i>Method</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>References</i>
Appreciative inquiry	Appreciative inquiry is an approach and process that turns problem solving on its head. Instead of finding the best ways to solve a pressing problem, it places the focus on identifying the best of what's already present in an organisation or community and finding ways of enhancing this to pursue dreams and possibilities of what could be.	<i>Key introductory texts</i> Barrett and Fry 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008 <i>Applications to SES</i> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003; appreciative-inquiry.org; imaginechicago.org
Theory U	Theory U is a multi-stakeholder dialogic change process that places emphasis on 'presencing' the internal consciousness and how it affects the ways in which we engage with the complex systems around us. It is designed to generate collective insight, shared commitment and the creative capacities needed to address complex problems.	<i>Key introductory texts</i> Senge et al. 2004; Kahane 2004; Scharmer 2008 <i>Applications to SES</i> The Sustainable Food Laboratory SFL: sustainablefoodlab.org
Social innovation labs and transformation labs (T-Labs)	Social innovation labs combine insights from group psychology and whole-system processes, along with social innovation theory, with techniques and tools from design thinking to create a new framework for both invention and institutionalisation of social innovations. T-Labs advanced this thinking, adding an emphasis on SES dynamics while exploring the plurality of pathways that contribute to sustainability transformations.	<i>Key introductory texts</i> Westley et al. 2015; The Pathways Network 2018; Pereira et al. 2020 <i>Applications to SES</i> Charli-Joseph et al. 2018; Van Zwanenberg et al. 2018

<i>Method</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>References</i>
The circle	At its most essential level, the circle is a participatory format that allows a group of people to slow down, practise deep listening and truly think together. When practised fully, it can be a physical embodiment of the root of the word dialogue: ‘meaning flowing through’.	<i>Key introductory texts</i> Baldwin 1994; fromthefourdirections.org ; peerspirit.com <i>Applications to SES</i> Kufunda Village (a learning centre focusing on rural community development in Zimbabwe): kufunda.org
Scenarios	Scenarios are possible and plausible pictures of the future that can be developed in a variety of ways (see Chapter 11). Participatory scenarios are created through a series of conversations in which a group of people invent and consider several varied stories about how the future may unfold. Ideally, these stories should be carefully researched and full of detail, be able to expose new understandings and hold some surprises. Scenarios can be powerful tools for challenging current assumptions about the world. In doing so, they lift the barriers that constrain our own creativity and understanding about the future.	<i>Key introductory texts</i> Schwartz 1991; Senge et al. 2004; Van der Heijden 2005; Kahane 2004, 2012 <i>Applications to SES</i> The Future of Food: southernafricafoodlab.org/ transformative-scenario-planning ; Pereira et al. 2018a; Freeth and Drimie 2016
World café	The world café is an intentional way to create a living network of conversations about questions that matter. It is a methodology that enables (12 to 1 200) people to think together and intentionally create new, shared meaning and collective insight.	<i>Key introductory text</i> Brown, Isaacs, and The World Café Community 2005 <i>Applications to SES</i> collectivewisdominitiative.com/papers/pioneers_dialogue/13_world.pdf
Learning journeys	Learning journeys are about getting away from behind one’s desk, out of one’s comfort zone, conference rooms and hotels. They are physical journeys from one place to another, intended to explore and experience the world first-hand.	<i>Key introductory text</i> reospartners.com/tools/learning-journeys <i>Applications to SES</i> Pereira et al. 2020; reospartners.com/projects/bhavishya-alliance-for-child-nutrition ; reospartners.com/wp-content/uploads/old/bhavishya.pdf
Listening projects and dialogue interviewing	Listening projects and dialogue interviewing are methods that create an opportunity for asking meaningful questions, listening with an open mind and connecting to what another person is saying, to help that person uncover knowledge they may not even have known they had.	<i>Key introductory texts</i> dialogonleadership.org ; listeningproject.info <i>Applications to SES</i> Drimie et al. 2018; alertademocratica.org/en ; reospartners.com/moving-through-tough-terrain-the-role-of-hope/ ; reospartners.com/tools/dialogue-interviews

Case study 9.1: Food systems in the Western Cape, South Africa

A process of knowledge co-production and initiating social innovation was instituted as part of a research project in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The main aim of the process was to convene a facilitated dialogue called a transformation lab (T-Lab) to discuss challenges in the provincial food system seen from a range of diverse perspectives, and to originate potentially transformative innovations intended to shift the system onto a more desirable trajectory. This example shows how a number of different methods were merged to create a dynamic process with concrete results.

A transformative process values actor interaction. By connecting alternative food system actors and proponents, the dialogue created bridges by, for example, linking chefs to producers, restaurateurs to informal traders and academics to actual work on the ground. These processes were an opportunity for these actors to reimagine the ways in which food is produced, processed and consumed and potentially to become more embedded, sustainable and strategically aligned to influence the dominant food system. The facilitated dialogue consisted of two workshops.

Workshop 1

The first workshop was a ‘safe space’ for participants from across food systems, particularly in the Western Cape, with an interest or stake in these systems. The aim was to determine:

- The viability of linking alternative food actors into the mainstream without losing the integrity that makes them small-scale/alternative
- How to build relationships that enable alternative food systems to grow

Participants included chefs, researchers, artists, food activists, producers, retailers, food innovators, an anthropologist, a food scientist and an artisanal baker. Four researchers from the Centre for Sustainability Transitions at Stellenbosch University, the Southern Africa Food Lab and the Stockholm Resilience Centre facilitated the dialogue. Beforehand, a rapid survey was sent out to participants who had confirmed their attendance. The survey consisted of five open-ended questions focused on activities that the actors are involved in within the food system, their expectations of the dialogue and areas that they considered important intervention points. The intention was for these feedbacks to shape the process.

Workshop 2

The second dialogue was designed as a consolidation workshop and included both former and new participants (Figure 9.1). All participants from the first workshop were invited, as well as new contacts in wider networks. Participants included permaculture specialists, food and land activists, restaurateurs, urban farmers, a representative from the informal traders’ association, researchers, an anthropologist and an indigenous food innovator.

As food systems are so complex, with a multitude of actors and underlying issues and outcomes, the dialogue built on a systems approach that integrates thinking, re-viewing, reflecting and doing. The aim was to translate concrete coalitions and ideas into action through building relationships and commitment for the actors to drive change.

The second dialogue focused on strengthening the trust between participants in the emerging coalition of change, which would enable them to continue to define and implement breakthrough solutions. It sought to build on what was identified in the first workshop: ideas and actions pivoting on the intersections between niche, artisanal and fledgling projects intended to provide alternatives to the dominant food system so as to contribute to its disruption over time.

The consolidation workshop was based on three distinct movements that unfolded over two days. These were:

1. Sensing the system
2. Letting go (old ways of working)
3. Letting come (emerging innovation)

Two facilities were also available to support participants as they immersed themselves in activities:

- **The ideas room** was a physical space available to all participants at any time for deeper reflection. It contained coloured pens, wax crayons, playdough, water, seeds and images to form a food exhibition.
- **Collective food preparation** was also an important part of the process. This was done in a way that built an understanding of combining different foods, flavours and textures through experimentation and eating.

Figure 9.1 (A) Participants of a food systems dialogue in Stellenbosch during a plenary discussion, July 2016, and (B) participants during a speed-dating discussion at a T-Lab on transforming the Western Cape food system, May 2019 (© Laura Pereira)

Limitations

Many dialogue processes take a significant amount of time in terms of design, preparation and execution. Given that these processes can span multiple generations, there may not be ‘immediate results’ or ‘evidence of transformation’. During and beyond the dialogue, there is a need for real-world experimentation, but the concept of ‘experimenting’ in areas of complex social-ecological challenges has impacts on people and the planet, often in ways that are unanticipated (Moore et al. 2018). In addition, in terms of SES work, facilitated dialogue may not necessarily help to identify critical tipping points (i.e. it will depend on the knowledge that emerges during the facilitated processes) or to reveal complex causality (see Schlüter et al. 2019). This raises questions of ethics and accountability within the process, particularly for researchers and facilitators who may ‘see’ those dynamics more clearly but are too top-down in their facilitation roles.

The facilitation processes discussed in Table 9.1 are not recipes for dialogue that should be applied universally, nor are they prescribed as specific tools for specific situations. Rather, each tool should be understood in terms of the context, story and impetus behind how these processes were developed. Similarly, tools can provide safety and comfort as they may help one to function in a complex world. A challenge is that a tool can become like a lens that affects how our surroundings are seen. If we wear only one lens all the time, our perception of the very thing we are trying to change may become distorted.

Resource implications

In terms of resource implications, at a minimum a design of a process, a facilitator and a physical space are required. Key participants involved in the exchange need to be convened with a facilitator in a place conducive to meaningful conversation and exchange as appropriate and within context. An effective facilitator with experience and integrity is necessary. Convening dialogue processes are active interventions in a system, designed for instigating change. Researchers should therefore allow time for careful reflection about what the potential implications of the dialogue process might be. In addition, all ethical considerations should be taken into account. The reflections from researchers who are increasingly using these methods for more action-oriented research are outlined in Pereira et al. (2019). It is strongly recommended to design these collaborative spaces in conjunction with key stakeholders and experienced facilitators. In addition to being a time-consuming process to set up and conduct, dialogues can also be very emotionally draining for the convenors as they seek to hold the space through all the highs and lows of group dynamics. It is therefore important to have a good team that can hold things together. Convening dialogues is not for everybody, but can be a really rewarding experience for those prepared to develop facilitation skills.

New directions

Variations on conventional approaches to collaboration are emerging, based on the acknowledgement that collaboration is not the only nor necessarily the best option in all situations. Choosing to collaborate is a pragmatic choice, often when high levels of complexity exist and where a clear way forward is not apparent. In conventional terms, collaboration assumes that the group first strives for agreement on what the problem is that they are trying to solve and identify a common purpose for what they need to do. In contrast, ‘stretch collaboration’ (Kahane 2017) is based on three propositions. The first

stretch proposes that collaboration requires both conflict and connection rather than finding harmony. Second, stretch collaboration suggests that when the future is highly volatile and contested, we need to experiment our way forward. This is in contrast to conventional collaboration, which focuses on identifying a solution as quickly as possible and creating a plan to achieve it. The third stretch suggests that the group needs to change both themselves and others, and step into the game. In contrast, conventional collaboration tries to advocate for influencing others' actions – to change 'them'. Given the complex and uncertain nature of many SES challenges, along with the social conflict that transformations may unearth, we suggest that it is essential to take the insights from stretch collaboration forward into dialogue processes.

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